

Market intelligence

US Hispanic Flavor Preference

How the flavor industry can deliver to this growing and diversifying population

Here are the raw numbers: the growth of the US Hispanic population far outstrips all other segments, accounting for an astonishing 50% of the total annual population increase. As of 2004, there were 41.3 million documented Hispanics living in the United States, 14% of the total population. Forecasts project that the US Hispanic population could total more than 100 million by 2050, accounting for nearly 25% of the total population. The result? The United States may well become the first- or second-most populace Hispanic nation in the world.

Virginia Dare's group vice president in charge of marketing, Anton Angelich, states the obvious: "To ignore a population that will be about a quarter of the [US] population is just not smart business. You need to attend to these people's interests."

Growing Influence

"One hundred years ago there wasn't pizza in this country," says Angelich. "Now it's a worldwide US export." Indeed, the United States has a long history of adopting and adapting food traditions, making the growing influence of the Hispanic community worth watching. "It wasn't all that long ago that words like 'taco' and 'fajita' and 'mojito' were unknown," says Angelich. "Now they're part of our food heritage and culture." And that's just the beginning.

Diverse Population

Virginia Dare, in exploring Hispanic flavors, emphasizes that the population is not covered by a single overarching identity. "The Hispanic population isn't monolithic," says Angelich. "You have people from many different countries and ancestries, different kinds of acculturation in the United States, [etc.]"

Just as in recent years Asian cuisine has diversified into very specific regional Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese flavors, the fractured Hispanic population has distinct, varied segments. According to US Census numbers, the Hispanic population is dominated by people of Mexican (58.5%), Spanish/other non-specified Hispanic (17.6%) and Puerto Rican (9.6%) origin/ancestry, with smaller pockets of people with Central and South American, Cuban and Dominican roots.

Within these individual groups are a dizzying amount of subsets based on location, age, income and length of time in the United States. Urban Mexican-Americans living in Texas are distinct from those living in Colorado, just as newly arrived Mexican immigrants differ from third-generation Mexican-Americans living in the Northwest. It should be no surprise that the food/flavor choices these individuals make can vary widely.

Cultural Blends

The engines of these differences are acculturation, assimilation and retroacculturation, which drive choices between the familiar and the novel, the traditional and the new, creating compelling blends of flavor choices. Acculturation, according to Virginia Dare, is "the process of picking and choosing between the best of both worlds," while assimilation is "the process of rejecting the old and accepting the new."

Retroacculturation, meanwhile, can be defined as the process some acculturated Hispanics undergo in reclaiming traditions, whether through culture (watching Spanish-language TV) or food (eating more traditional dishes), in an effort to regain some piece of the culture left behind. Some researchers have found that acculturated Hispanics may experience this phenomenon when they start families, as the notion of heritage begins to take on greater significance. How various Hispanic consumers make these choices has everything to do with age, gender, lifestyle, level of acculturation, language, shopping behavior and more.

In the course of its research into Hispanic flavor preferences, Virginia Dare spoke with one woman, identified as Aura, who ran a traditional household in which she did all of the cooking while her husband did none. Yet, says Angelich, “She loved chocolate chip cookies—that was something she didn’t have in El Salvador.” Researchers looking into immigrant populations constantly have to ask themselves: What are the blends going on here; how are people acculturating and assimilating?

Asking the Right Questions

So how can flavor companies even begin to dig down into all these disparate phenomena and find out what a rapidly diversifying population actually wants and needs? When you’re talking about US Hispanics, defining a target audience isn’t easy. Angelich breaks the challenge down like this: “If we’re talking about a product geared toward Mexican Americans in the West,” he says, “that’s who you test your products with, and you know what your baseline is.” In any segment, Angelich explains that companies have to know what kinds of products that population currently has, and if this group is satisfied with those options. Then he asks, “Would they prefer something that came from where they came from? Or are they looking for something new and how does it blend in?”

“We’ve conducted one-on-one,” interviews, he says. “We sat down with people who were Salvadoran, people who were first generation, second generation, third generation, mainland Puerto Rican. We’ve spoken with Mexican Americans and people from South America to understand what’s going on. ‘Are you using US ingredients, are you blending things?’”

Vanilla, Strawberry and Mango Preferences

Rick Brownell, Virginia Dare’s vice president of vanilla products, has noted a preference among both Hispanics and non-Hispanics for Bourbon vanilla, which has a

prunelike/raisin, haylike, creamy, sweet vanillin profile. However, Hispanics have shown a greater preference for Papua New Guinea (Tahitian type) vanilla, which is characterized by strong floral and anisic notes found in many artificial vanilla flavors.

Strawberry: Virginia Dare sensory staff also conducted an ice cream panel to determine Hispanic strawberry preference. The results show that Hispanic consumers prefer a strawberry flavor that is more fruity than fruity-dairy-creamy-vanillalike.

Mango: Angelich says that there are at least 2,500 varieties of mango cultivars, which are used for everything from sauces to juices to yogurts and bakery fillings. The three main types identified by Virginia Dare’s flavor chemists are:

- Indian: Sweet, peachlike.
- Mexican: Red-green ripe variety.
- Manila: Juicy; usually Alaulfo variety.



“The successful mango products of five or 10 years ago had a cord of familiarity,” says Angelich, pointing out that the familiar peachlike character of those products made the new flavor twist more palatable.

A panel was presented with three beverages, each containing a mango flavor based on one of the three main fruit types. The Indian type beverage was characterized by a floral profile, while the Manila type beverage had a balanced juicy-citrusy-floral flavor. The type most preferred by Hispanic panelists was the Mexican type beverage, which has interesting sweet-ripe-sulfury profiles that are more true to the fruit.

Angelich notes that non-Hispanics liked the Indian type most, which he says can be explained by mango's early appearances on the US beverage market. "The greatest introduction of mango taste to the mainstream US population was probably through products like Snapple's mango beverage," he says. "That was not as strong of a taste as the Mexican type. It was probably milder, more peachlike. If you think about a lot of the introductions of things into a new culture, they start at the more mild form." The sulfur character of an Indian-type mango, says Angelich, may not have been accepted when mango beverages first were introduced to the mainstream US market. "One of the key things in succeeding with a new product is a cord of familiarity," he continues. People will try new things, but they need to relate to something with which they're familiar. "The successful mango products of five or 10 years ago had a cord of familiarity," says Angelich, pointing out that the familiar peachlike character of those products made the new flavor twist more palatable.

But these initial, milder forms eventually can give way to greater authenticity and adventuresome products. Citing the example of hot peppers which, when they first started appearing in the US in the 1950s, were milder, Angelich says, "Today, if you think about the kind of hot spice levels that we have in our food from Mexican and Indian cooking, it's much, much stronger."



"It wasn't all that long ago that words like 'taco' and 'fajita' and 'mojito' were unknown," says Angelich. "Now they're part of our food heritage and culture."

Most Popular Flavors

Among US Hispanics, Virginia Dare researchers have identified ice cream flavor preferences beyond standard global favorites vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. These include *dulce de leche*, caramel, pineapple and banana. Angelich notes, "Some things like mango and papaya work better in a sherbet than they do in an ice cream with these groups because the expectations relate to water ices and things like that in their home countries which are a little different category than ice cream."

In the category Angelich identifies as "ethnic sodas," he sees popularity with hibiscus, the cream-sodalike cola (sometimes spelled "kola") champagne, passion fruit, tamarind, tangerine, watermelon and horchata (or "orxata") (a flavored rice beverage). "The preferences vary," Angelich points out, "from Caribbean to Central American to Mexican depending on the culture and the experience."

In confections, US Hispanics have preferences for strawberry, lemon, lime, tamarind, coconut and pineapple. In baked goods, Angelich notes "strong interest in guava in bakery fillings and cakes with some other types of fillings."

Beyond the Hispanic Population: Sphere of Influence

Of course, adoption and adaptation of flavors isn't a one-way street. As much as the Aura's of the world are eschewing traditional desserts for chocolate chip cookies, mainstream US consumers are embracing Hispanic foods at a healthy clip. And as this exchange increases, specific regional flavors are emerging.

"Chinese food came here at the turn of the 20th century from the Canton area," says Angelich. "It was very limited and mild and it had pasta-type products—lo mein and chow mein and chow fun. Now it's become much more sophisticated and regional." The same, he says, is true for Italian cuisine. "People are now saying, 'Just don't give me an Italian red sauce—I want something from Sardinia or something from northern Italy with polenta.' People are curious and exposed to more things and become more varied."

To get a copy of this article or others, visit the P&F magazine Article Archives at www.PerfumerFlavorist.com/articles. 